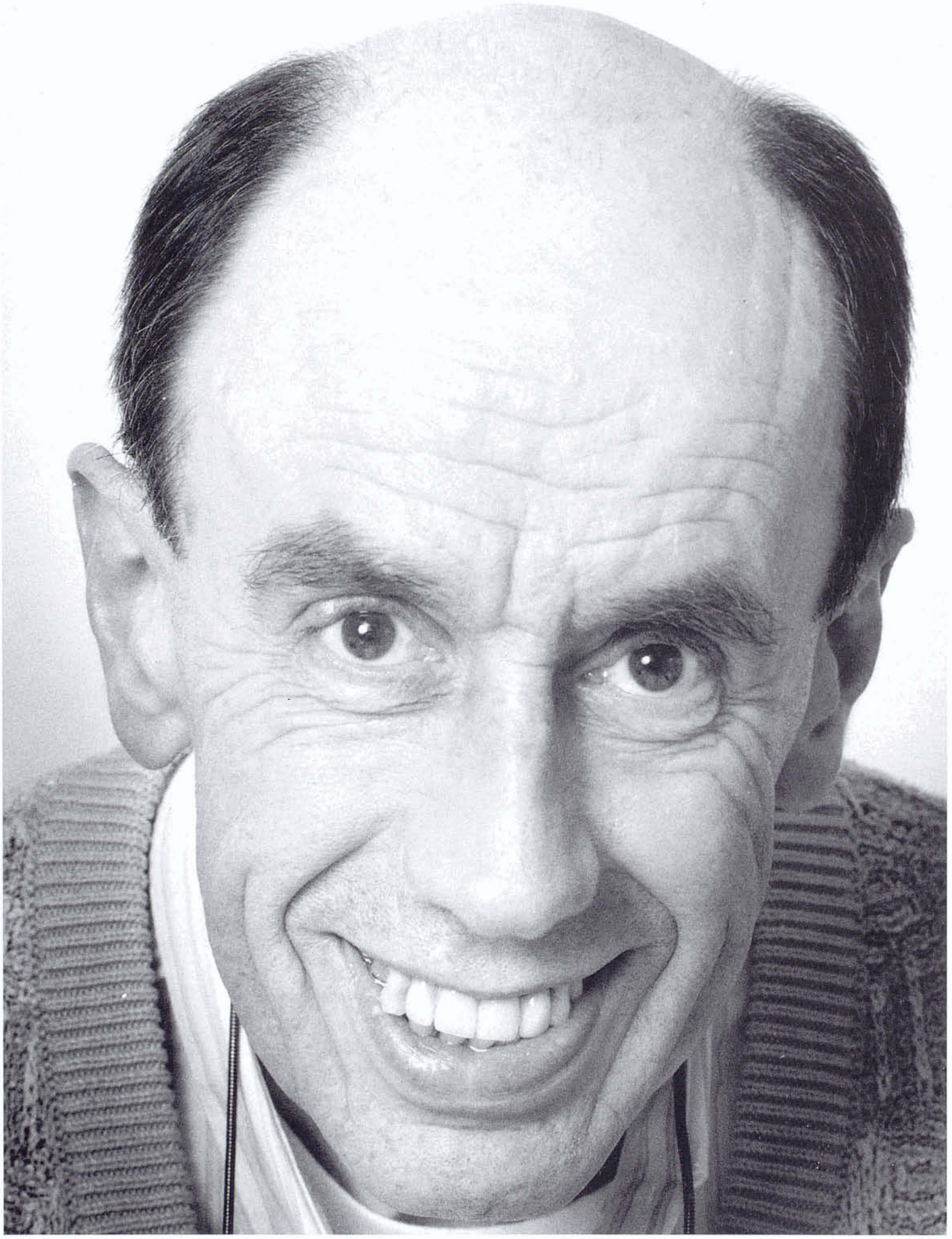


MIQUEL MARTÍ I POL, THE PEOPLE'S POET

MIQUEL MARTÍ I POL, THE COUNTRY'S MOST POPULAR LIVING POET, HAS RECEIVED UNANYMOUS PUBLIC RECOGNITION. FOLLOWING THE PUBLICATION OF HIS LATEST WORK, *TEMPS D'INTERLUNI*, HE HAS BEEN AWARDED THE 1991 PREMI D'HONOR DE LES LLETRES CATALANES FOR HIS REMARKABLE CAPACITY FOR COMMUNICATION WITH HIS PEOPLE.

PEP BLAY AND M. MARCH JOURNALISTS

In his home-town of Roda de Ter, Miquel Martí i Pol, at the age of sixty-two, is living one of the high points of his literary career. With trembling hands that steady as he writes, his voice fragile and his words clear, the 1991 Premi d'Honor de les Lletres Catalanes has for more than thirty years been singing the praises of writing poetry as a therapy for releasing tensions.

Behind the sensibility of a constant smile and a delicately scrutinizing look is the man who left school at fourteen to work as a clerk in a spinning mill and who at nineteen contracted pulmonary consumption and had to stay in bed for a year. By then he had already started some early experiments with poetry that were to lead up to the publication of *Paraules al vent* (1954), awarded the Ossa Menor prize. Gradually, a series of collections of his appeared in which his commitment to the Catalan political and social situation was closely tied to human reflection. *El poble* (1966) and *La fàbrica* (1972) contain the poems from this period, in which the worker-poet reflects on events around him.

In 1970, multiple-sclerosis led to increasing reclusion and a lack of physical autonomy, which was stabilised in 1975. The seventies were to confirm Martí i Pol as one of the great poets of Catalan literature, thanks to a direct form of poetry that is at once resounding and fragile, in which he skilfully manipulates the parallel between his own illness, his oppressed nation and the weakness of the human soul.

These feelings fully identify the poet with his people, as in these lines from *Vint-i-set poemes en tres temps* (1972), which the singer-songwriter Ramon Muntaner later set to music and in which the writer's physical limitations –his fragile voice, the inability to walk, difficulties in making love and his trembling hands– take on a double meaning as obstacles to the freedom of a country under a dictatorship:

All I ask is
to be able to talk without disguising my voice,
to walk without crutches,
to make love without having to ask permission,
to write without rules.

Or, if this seems too much,
to write without having to disguise my voice,
to walk without rules,
to speak without having to ask permission,
to make love without crutches.

Or, if this seems too much,
to make love without having to disguise my voice,
to write without crutches,
to walk without having to ask permission,
to be able to speak without rules.

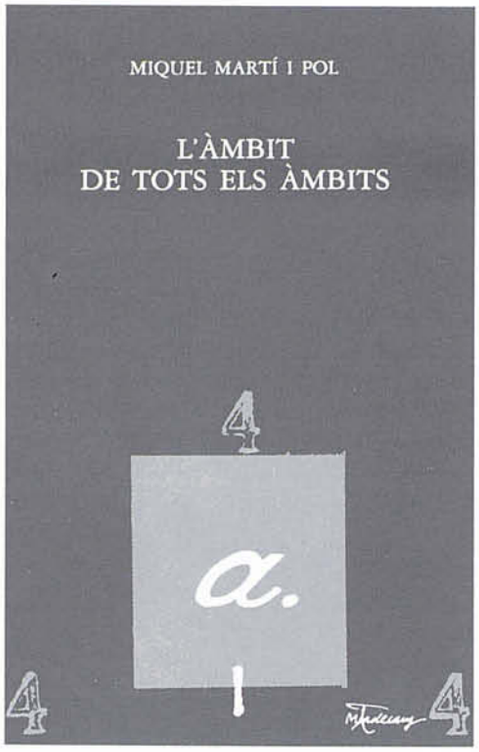
Or, if this seems too much...

His poetry branched out, while remaining faithful to the obsessions that marked his work. "I don't repeat myself. I just say things that are similar", he

warned in *L'hoste insòlit* (1978). The culminating point of his work is to be found in *Estimada Marta* (1978), his most popular book, which has sold more than 35,000 copies. And he takes a more radicalized stance in another of his best collections, *L'àmbit de tots els àmbits* (1981): "just two words: we are. The rest are trivia". The poet is deeply committed to the reader and his poems are often seen as battle hymns, as if he were chronicling the feelings of a period when the first democratic liberties were timidly raising their head:

We shall turn silence into gold
and words into fire. The skin of this return
collects the rainwater, and by striving
we erase privileges. Slowly
we emerge from the great well, climbing up the ivy,
not yet safe from any mishap.
We shall turn the old pain into love
and shall leave it, solemnly, to history.

A few years later, the death of his first wife marked another turning point in his life and therefore in his literary career, and was reflected in the sadness and tenderness of *Llibre d'absències* (1985). Immersed in his solitude, enclosed in his little world at Roda de Ter, Miquel Martí i Pol became an expert on silence, "because silence makes the memories more substantial, and more intimate the time given us to live them".
Over the years, Martí i Pol has not only borne the cruelty of fate with resignation, but has also impregnated his latest poems, published in *Temps d'Interluni* (1990), with a melancholy vitality that demonstrates that the poet is still fully active today, partly as a result of the infectious energy of his companion Montserrat.
Recently, Miquel Martí i Pol stayed with his friend, the popular singer-songwriter Lluís Llach, at his home in the village of Parlavà, in the Empordà. There he wrote the poems included in his latest collection, *Suite de Parlavà*, to be published next November. As well as this, the two have considered the possibility of working together. Llach was one of the many musicians who during the seventies put music to the poetry of Miquel Martí i Pol, along with Ramon Muntaner, the group Coses, Joan Manuel Serrat and others. This brought the rebel poet's work to an even wider audience and gave him even greater power to connect with the people.
To round off the year, he has been awarded the highest honour in Catalan literature, the Premi d'Honor de les Lletres Catalanes, for his ability to communicate with his time and his people. The country's most popular living poet has received unanymous public recognition.



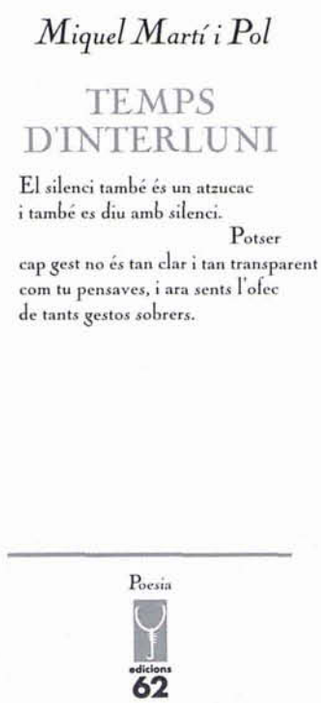
–Your literary career started with the publication of *Paraules al vent*, which received the Óssa Menor prize in 1953. Now, in 1991, you've been awarded the Premi d'Honor de les Lletres Catalanes. Do you think these two prizes represent the discovery of a promise and the recognition of fulfilment, respectively?
–I don't think the Óssa Menor represented the recognition of a promise, or at least, I don't think it did for many people. In fact, the publication of Paraules al vent *in 1954 went almost unnoticed. Of course, at that time there was very little discussion of Catalan poetry in the newspapers, but I only remember reading one review –in "La Vanguardia", I think–, which wasn't particularly encouraging. Apart from that, I remember that two or three days after being awarded the prize Miquel Arimany and Josep Pedreira took me to visit Carles Riba, who along with his wife gave us a warm welcome, and when I asked him, timidly, what he had thought of my book, he said he remembered a sonnet and a song to the motherland but that he would have liked the prize to go to Manuel de Pedrolo, who was also competing that year, "because of what he meant to the country". I didn't know what to make of this answer. Since then I've begun to understand it a bit better. But I still don't understand completely. No, at that time I don't think I could have been thought of as a promise,and I don't think the Premi d'Honor is recognition for an established author. Established –who by? The work gets done by doing it, as my godmother used to say, and I get on with my work as best I can from my hometown –something that a lot of people still don't understand, surprising as that may seem. But as far as I'm concerned, there are similarities and parallels between the two prizes: I wasn't expecting either of them, and both of them made me very happy.*

–Your work is still in full swing, unlike some writers who have received the Premi d'Honor de les Lletres Catalanes. *Temps d'Interluni* appeared recently and *Suite de Parlavà* will be coming out in November. Can we, as some critic has said, speak of a revival of your work, both as regards your activity and its recognition by the public?
–I think people have made too much of this business of saying that my work isn't finished yet, and I'm not referring to myself so much as to other award-winners. Without having to look up a list of my predecessors, I can remember a string of authors who were still in full swing when they received the Premi d'Honor: Pere Quart, Salvador Espriu, Pere Calders, Vicent Andrés Estellés, Josep Maria Llompart and others. I don't know why I've been picked out, because I'm not even the youngest person to have received it, as I was sixty-two in March. Apart from that, though, I think perhaps there is a certain revival of my poetry –a very relative one, of course–, bearing in mind that between 1986 and 1989 I wrote very few poems and now they seem to come more easily. Of course, calling it a revival might be going a bit too far, but, OK,

let's say there is. Now, whether or not there's going to be public recognition to go with this revival, I don't know –I hope so, of course. We'll have to see.

–When the first volume of the *Obra Completa* came out, you said you weren't too keen on the idea of publishing your early poems because they were "ingenuous" and even "pedantic". Also, the committed or social poetry so characteristic of many of your early books has, with time, come to play a less central role in your work. Do you think poetry has an expiry date?
–Good poetry –really good, I mean– doesn't. Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Poe, Mallarmé, Auden, Pound, etc., and Ausiàs, Jordi de Sant Jordi, Carner, Riba, Ferrater, or Kavafis, or Rilke, or Montale, or T.S. Eliot, or Ungaretti, etc. couldn't possibly be said to have an expiry date. The thing is that good poetry –really good, I repeat– isn't very common. I've given you a string of names and the list could be even longer, of course, but let me repeat my two statements: good poetry doesn't have an expiry date and good poetry isn't very common. Fashions are another thing altogether, these movements that somehow govern collective sensibility. Luckily, though, good poetry is above life's momentary and sometimes rash trends. I would almost go so far as to say that one of the most genuine interpretations of the idea of eternity can be found in good poetry. And this ought to make us think, because, as I see it, man's essence remains almost unchanged. To me, reading good poetry is a magnificent lesson in humility.

–The human individual condition has gradually replaced in importance the role of the collective condition in your work. What relationship could there be between the restoration of democracy and the development of the subject matter in your work?
–I can't imagine the poet divorced from the conditions in which he lives. That ivory tower business has always seemed to me to be a resource that, at most, might reflect the moment of writing and which, subsequently, can be applied to any art form. Contrary to what some people think, then, I think we poets have got our feet firmly on the ground, so to speak, because the practice of poetry forces us to be constantly attentive to changes, to mutations, and

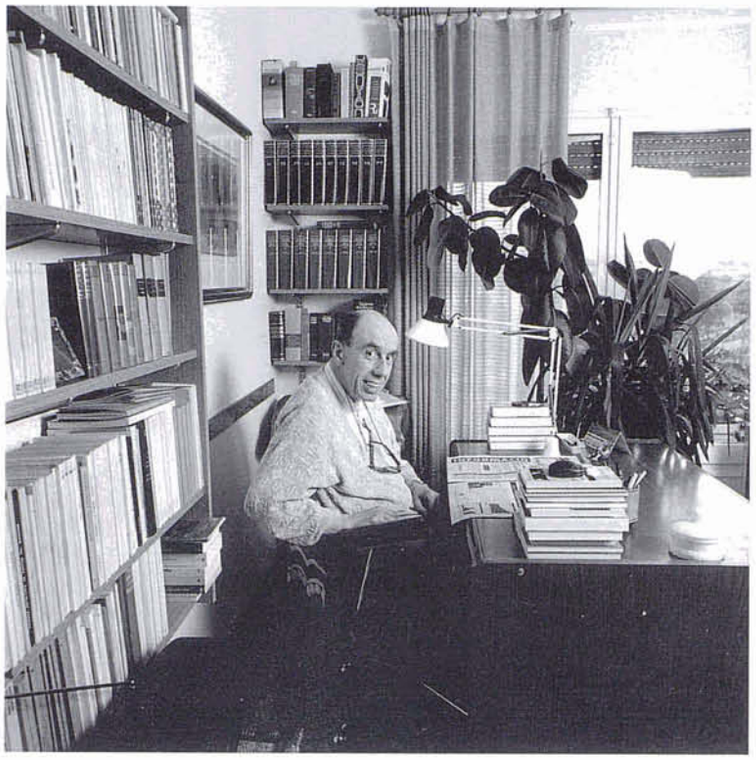


it demands unfailing rigour and coherence. And it's in this way, taken in the broadest sense, that I think the restoration of democracy has influenced my work. At the same time, though, in my case, we have to add the individual circumstances –which are no secret and are quite characteristic and intense– that have helped to bring about the change. In any case, I can't and won't imagine myself isolated from my time and my people. I make an effort to live fully and only if I succeed will I be able to infuse vitality and authenticity into my poetry.

–As we read in the history books of Catalan literature, to what extent did Marxism influence a whole generation of Catalan writers in the sixties, and yourself in particular?
–I wouldn't like to make an overall judgement. Personally, I started to read Marx when I was ill with tuberculosis, when I was nineteen. I don't pretend to have read him either in depth or well. My advantage, though, if that's the right word, is that I belong to a particular social class –the working-class– and have first-hand experience of capitalist exploitation. At the end of the fifties, when a lot of poets were writing social poetry, mine, which technically was almost certainly less polished, had the added value of authenticity; and let me say that authenticity –that is, the testimonial value– was very important in that poetry. I find the current rejection of Marxism difficult to understand. If Marx had never existed there would be a big gap in the history of philosophy, and this gap would also have affected the history of art.

–It's not easy to find a poetic *ouevre* in which vitalism and pessimism are so closely linked. Aren't ambition and resignation incompatible?
–I don't like the vitalism/ambition, pessimism/ resignation parallel. Also, I think what there is in my work more than anything else is a life lived, experience, to use a word that doesn't appeal much to me either. Any process of interiorization demands a previous risk, acceptations and refusals. Life is this oscillating movement, and perhaps poetry's internal dynamism comes from the reflexive acceptance of all the incongruities we build ourselves up around.
Successes and failures are the warp and the weft of life, and both are inevitable, they're both necessary. Making poetry from them doesn't mean just transcribing them into verse, so much as feeling them as a substance of our being, like the backbone of our reflection, the driving force behind our movement. I don't know if I succeed, but I try to squeeze the most out of every moment of my life, and I try to marry apparent opposites which, in fact, are no more than rhetorical inventions with a single valid function: to explain.

–Your poems often use the second person to express your own interior debates. Why do you use this literary resource of the two-way dialogue?
–I've often said that my worst habit is thinking. I'm constantly interrogating myself. I've always done the same, but now that my situation forces me to spend countless hours alone, even more so. I need an interlocutor. I don't see how anyone can live without questioning life and therefore without questioning himself constantly. I think this feature of my poetry must come from here. Also, confronting this frequently uncomfortable and challenging "you" day after day allows me to universalize my



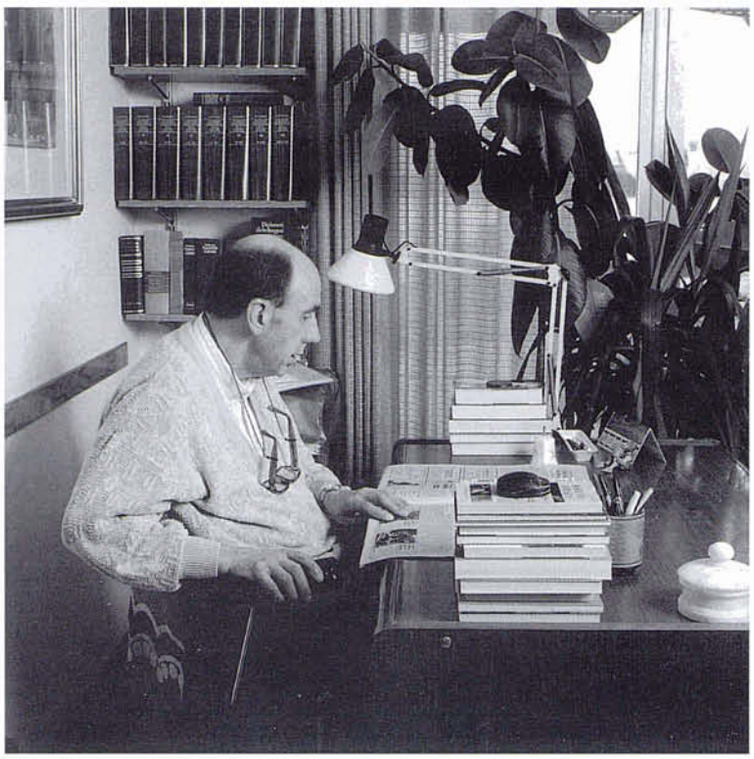
feelings, to share them, to relate them amongst themselves, to analyse them down to the last detail. You might almost say I'm locked in combat with myself –that is, with this "you" I have the habit of talking to and that never submits– and this makes an implacable demand on me for a coherence which I probably wouldn't be able to achieve without this resource.

–"Look at me closely: I am the other", you said in *Vint-i-set poemes en tres temps*. What's left of that duality?
–The same as when I wrote the poem you've just mentioned. The intimate duality, taken as a search for one's identity, comes before the poem, of course; it's always formed part of me, and taking it into account probably helps in understanding the presence of this "you" I was speaking of a moment ago. But in April 1970 this reality materialized, so to speak –it made itself physically present to me and has never abandoned me nor ever will, as long as I live.

–Through the description of the feelings arising from your illness, you've shown society's ills and those of the human condition itself. Has this multiplicity of feelings in your poetry always been conscious?
–I've always tried to make poetry ring inside me, and as far as is possible I've also tried to make this ring perceptible to people reading or listening to me, so that they could share it, or even make it theirs. I've already said that I don't understand this ivory tower business and I've also mentioned the need for an interlocutor so as to try and universalize one's experience. I see poetry as an attempt at communication, like an act of love. In spite of this, the particular limitations to which I've been submitted by the illness that has gripped me for more than twenty years, and the parallel that could be established with the sociopolitical circumstances Catalonia was living at that time –and in some ways is still living today– made me accentuate this tendency I was describing even more. In these last years, then, the procedure has taken on a new dimension and become much more conscious and, especially, much more loaded with meaning.

–How important would you say concepts such as destiny, chance and luck are in your poetry?
–Destiny and chance are inevitable references in my poetry of the last few years; luck, perhaps not so much. With the first two concepts, I almost always try to show or emphasize an ambivalence. Absolute certainty makes me shudder, because it leads to totalitarianism –active or passive, it doesn't matter. Destiny and chance –and to a certain extent luck– are words that suggest rather than define, and therefore allow several readings. Indefinition, in this case and as I see it, gives them a dimension and an almost inexplicable density.

–You've created a poetry that is clean and whose language is straightforward and direct, in which you've revealed your feelings undisguised by rhetoric. Do you think that all decoration or fiction makes poetry unclean?
–It depends on the link there is between poetic expression and feeling, or, if you like, between poetic expression and life experience. Poetry, like any art, has an artificial side to it. The concreteness of words rules out certain fancies, but even so, there would be no poetry without artifice. Now, lyricism usually arises through experience, and in my



particular case, I find deceit and even occultation repugnant. To me, decoration and fiction are perfectly valid if they serve the idea. This allows a balance between intention and form. If this balance is broken, the poem goes lame.

–Do you maintain the meaning of your poems from the "Capfoguer" collection, published in Estimada Marta: "Don't ask me to correct anything I've written"?
–In the sense that I won't renounce anything from my past, I maintain it fully. I'm anguished by today's haste, the urge to consume without even tasting, the almost immoderate desire for the future. Maybe it's a consequence of age. I'm fully aware that I've got more past than future and I cling to it –my past–, while trying to avoid mournful longing. Also, in my system of working, text correction plays an absolutely minimal part. I work on the poems in silence, then I write them and I hardly ever correct them.

–"In each word I put my existence at stake" is another of the definitive poems in this same book. Writing for survival? To what extent is writing painful to you and to what extent pleasurable?
–I don't know if it's right to relate the act of writing with pleasure and pain, although there are lots of different kinds both of pain and pleasure. Personally, I don't remember ever having felt really distressed when writing. If anything, I've felt like that when I've tried to express something and I haven't been able to find the words that satisfy me, or when I've reread something months or years after writing it. Writing, for me, is a release of tension. But later, at least in my case, the tension shows itself again and once again demands an answer. Perhaps it's this play that has created the image of writing for survival. But I don't know if anyone really needs to write to survive. At any rate, I'm not one of them; I write out of what you might call an intellectual need, and it's because of this need that I say that I stake my existence on each word, since I try to give an intense fullness to everything I write.

–Your work has been set to music by the songwriters of the "Nova Cançó" more than almost any other poet's and you've even sung some of your poems yourself. What do you think of the way your poems have been interpreted by musicians, on the one hand, and the public, on the other?
–My short period as a songwriter was very satisfying and I have fond memories of that time. On the other hand, I've never dared judge a song in terms of the fact that the words are mine. Every poem has its own music. When you add another, you create a new product, and I try as hard as I can to judge only that product. All the same, there's no doubt that the help from the songwriters has done a lot for the diffusion of my work. It's been an unexpected and very effective channel.

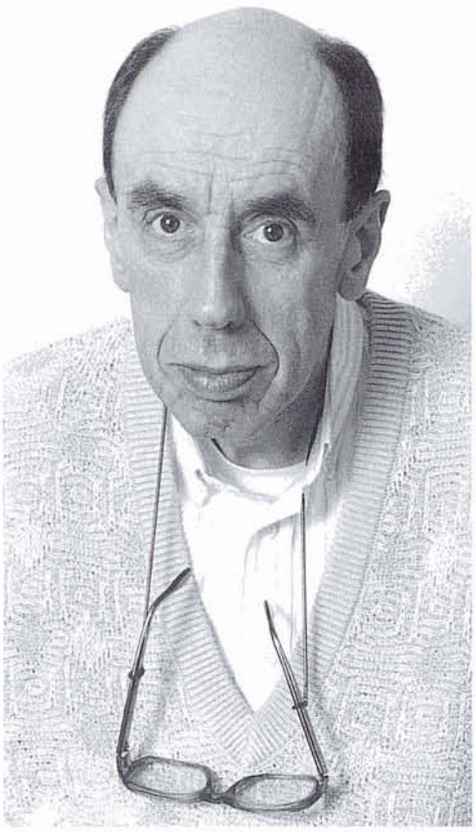
–Your home has been a little centre of pilgrimage for many writers who have wanted to share conversations, words, concerns and texts with you, as the poet Valerià Pujol remarked recently. With these meetings and these regular readings, how do you see the state of Catalan literature today?
–I wouldn't like to judge, because my knowledge is very limited and full of gaps. I read a lot, but there's a lot more published than I'm able to read. At the same time, luckily, the offer is getting

more varied and covers many areas on which it would be absurd for me to give an opinion. In general terms, all I can say is that the situation seems interesting enough to allow careful optimism for the future.

–It has been said that there are poets who are "Martipolians", at least in many writers' first poetic forays. Do you agree that you've created a school? What do you feel when you read poems by your "pupils" inspired in poems you've written?
–As I see it, a poet's teaching isn't something with immediate repercussions. You can admire someone and you can, of course, try to copy their way of expressing themselves with greater or lesser success. But I wouldn't call that creating a school. To me, creating a school means having a decisive influence not only on style but on thinking. In this respect, I'm quite convinced that I neither am nor ever will be of sufficient category to create a school. Of course, I've read reviews that say that some writer "Martipolates", but I don't think that's more than just a question of imitation. In fifty or a hundred years time it'll be possible to say whether or not I've created a school; not yet.

–Miquel Martí i Pol has laid bare his life in poetry. Do you think there's anything that can't be expressed in poetry?
–It's very generous to say that I've laid bare my life in poetry. I don't think anyone ever says everything about themselves, either in poetry or in any other field, if only because, in fact, no-one knows everything about themselves, either. Agustí Bartra said that poets had no need to write their autobiography because it already formed part of their work, and I don't think it was his remark originally, but came from further back. In fact, though, I think that the intimacy revealed by poetry belongs to a very particular, very specific semantic field. I once said that the best of me figured in my poems, and I said that because that's how I see it. But the life experience that shows through in poetry is nevertheless the distillation of day-to-day experience. In this sense, I think everything can be said through poetry, but it must, of necessity, be said poetically.

Alongside his work as a poet, Miquel Martí i Pol has translated writers like Neruda, Racine and Flaubert. He hasn't done any translating for some time, but "recently I had a proposal to translate a French poet I'm very fond of and I'm considering the possibility of accepting. It frightens me, though, because it would be very hard work. All the same, difficulty is always stimulating".



An impassioned reader, "because of my physical limitations I have very little time. My reading has always been disorderly and anarchic, perhaps because I'm self-taught. That's why I like to think that what's helped me most has been the accumulation of reading, rather than specific texts. For years, to me, everything was fundamental; now I'm more demanding".

Music is a faithful companion to him. "I wouldn't know how to work with music, but I can listen to a couple of hours a day and if I ever have to go without, I miss it. Some of the images in my latest poems give this virtual devotion of mine away. I also find it very difficult to forget musicality when it comes to writing. I very much like the fabric of the poem to answer to musical resonances. Both reading it and writing it I feel closer to this indescribable thing we call poetry".

Martí i Pol is always turning over new ideas in his mind, even though "these last few months I haven't written much, partly because I've been busy with things that couldn't wait. This summer I want to put aside some time for reflection, first to decide whether or not I accept the translation of the French poet I mentioned earlier, and also to try and reconsider certain aspects of my poetry which I might try to change slightly". The poet from Roda de Ter has won that agonizing interior struggle that had led him to doubt his literary future, ten years ago, in *Primer llibre de Bloomsbury*: "I don't know if I'll be able to write much more, because the effort of bearing the burden of the years I have yet to live could weary me and make me insipid."

And now, as he follows the questions, he seems to be repeating the words he wrote in his book *Estimada Marta*: "With people of very different origins, all of them strangers, I spend my time in pleasant conversation. I listen politely to their reasoning, I strive to grasp the details and get to the heart of the meaning. Questions and answers come and go, sometimes in haste, sometimes slowly. I only ask." ■